

Interview with Anu Pennanen (FI) and Stephane Querrec (FR)

Interview conducted by Esther Severi between April and September 2012 in the context of "Thematics: Micro Histories", Bains::Connective Brussels, Belgium.

ESTHER SEVERI: You are working on a particular subject – the closure of the Belgian branch of the Renault factory in Vilvoorde? When and why did you get interested in this topic?

Stéphane Querrec: When Anu and I started to work together, we both felt that the idea of human obsolescence today was a very important topic. It has become a commonplace inasmuch as people belonging to various classes find themselves treated or considered like rubbish because they have lost their job. So back in 2010 when I was in Belgium for a few weeks for an art project, I went to Limburg and visited the old mines there and I suddenly remembered the factory workers in Vilvoorde. In France, the workers at Renault-Vilvoorde made themselves heard when they came to Paris and to the North of France to strike. That's how I heard about it at that time. Finding myself in front of those beautiful decaying factories in Limburg my immediate feeling was that visiting old factories is very romantic. However the beauty overshadows the past and present conditions of work in factories, and it does not reveal in particular the system operating within them and the relations at stake: those binding workers with other workers and their bosses. So I told Anu the story of Renault-Vilvoorde and we started to think about what happened to workers who give 20 years or more of their life to their factory.

Anu Pennanen: I've been working in different cities such as Tallinn, Liverpool, and Paris I don't find working in Belgium particularly exotic. We were both trying to find an interesting site to trigger the work: architecture or environment, which has a specific meaning now but which is going to change in the future. Film is the proper medium to treat a subject that is about to vanish. There is an aspect of commemoration attached to the medium of cinema. Stéphane presented the idea of the factory at Vilvoorde. It's a different kind of space: it has nothing of the romantic aspects of the old factories. There is actually nothing romantic about how

a factory works. There are memories that are nostalgic and romantic, but the work itself has no romantic aspect. We were interested in having the Belgian, supposedly flat environment, which has a peculiar beauty. But we wanted above all to bring to the forefront the people and the end of the manual labor in the factory, and the experience of obsolescence. Nowadays we can all relate to these changes in society. Because everyone is in danger of becoming obsolete at any time.

ES: During your stay at Bains Connective, you worked a lot on the contact with the workers. How did the communication with them happen? Were people willing to give information about what happened? Was there an interest coming from them in this project being artistic?

SQ: The first Ex-workers we met who answered to our questions were as usual the people who wanted to talk about their lives, about what the situation was like for them now, about how it ended in the factory and their survival after that. We had to reframe our questions carefully, explaining that we were making a new story for a film, that we were not making a documentary, and that we were not interested in their personal history but rather in their collective memory as a group, as engaged members of a union, and as a group beyond union.

They explained, for example, that workers can strike for a few weeks, and during these weeks the union pays the workers. The main motto was: to fight against the closure of their factory, but some of the workers, namely the "hardcore group", decided to go beyond these secured weeks because they wanted to fight for their jobs and keep the factory open.

Among workers the question at the time of the strike was: should we accept the redundancy payment the managers are offering us or should we strike and negotiate to keep the factory open? Right here a division was strategically created by the managers, and yet a few workers decided to unite in solidarity and lose money in order to fight for their rights as a group. During our meetings with them we tried to create a collective discussion in order to get away from the personal histories. Of course, everyone had their own way of dealing with the situation, and on a personal level there were also tensions and different views back then. It was important to go beyond that, but even so when we met the workers individually and we heard their stories, views and experiences. Working in a factory gave them a real sense of identity, of belonging - the factory was a family history.

ES: Did they ask you questions about your project, about the making of a film?

SQ: The purpose of our stay at Belgium was to “discover” our film. We didn’t know exactly if it would be of documentary approach or a more fictional course of action based upon facts. Before you actually come to a place and start working you have a lot of ideas and projections about what you want to do and what it’s going to be about. Being in the field, however, forces you to face the reality of your subject and you have to reposition the project little by little. We kept the ex-workers informed about how the project developed over a period of months. At first they thought they would be “in” the film. Eventually they understood we needed their cooperation in the sense of giving us their views, their documents, letting us film in their places, and basically opening their door to us.

AP: You can’t really know how to make the subject visible until you go to the place itself and talk with people who are connected to it. It was interesting for us to discover how they all dealt with this traumatic situation, how different the reactions to the situation were, and what kind of outcomes they found for themselves. There are people whose involvement clearly goes beyond personal interest and they still have sort of a social or union mission. They are now active in local party politics, or doing things on a more global level, like sending packages to poor children in Africa. Some of them are employed in union organizations while others just found a new job. What is important for them is to keep the idea of solidarity alive.

After working with them we realized that it wouldn’t be particularly interesting for them to be in the film. They don’t need this process of looking at themselves. Their wish is that the subject is kept alive and talked about, not only of what happened at Vilvoorde, but a more general or international discussion about work and critical unionism. Eventually we wrote a scenario, based on everything we talked about with the workers, but it is a fiction. We film with local amateur actors this autumn, who are aware of the subject because they followed it or worked in a union.

ES: When does the film take place? Do you go back in time?

SQ: The film takes place today and in the near future. It traces what happens after such a traumatic event and is entitled *Staande! Debout!* The film follows one fictional character called Félix, who is based on a real worker who was part of the hardcore group of strikers.

He has been out of work since 15 years, and is a 70 years old pensioner. The real former worker who inspired this main character was actually the most traumatized person in the group of the workers (with the exception of the ones who committed suicide after the closure) because he lost more than a job. In the process of the closure he lost his identity, his social contacts, his work, and also his faith in society. The values of work dramatically changed for him, from one day to the next.

In our film the main character wonders what happened to his friends. He then starts looking after his former colleagues and strikers in order to convince them to gather together again, in memory of those who died in the meantime. However, these encounters don't go the way he imagined they might. Some are embarrassed, others have moved on, but all are in pain. They finally choose to meet at the Raised Fist, a steel sculpture commissioned by the workers and a union, erected between 1997-1998 and made by local sculptor Rik Poot. The Raised Fist is a very powerful symbol of struggle. In reality the former Renault workers regularly meet there, usually at the time of the anniversary of the closure, the 27th of February.

AP: When you make a film, you easily describe it as fiction or documentary, but I'm reluctant to put things into these categories. As an experimental filmmaker, being faced with the idea of formats or genres is a constant problem. You have to identify your film very clearly within a certain kind of parameters and I find this is a little absurd. When the film is good, beautiful or also consciously ugly, it shouldn't be more important whether it follows the rules of a certain genre or not. This is a problem that you face as a filmmaker from the first step. An interesting project might be left aside just because the people who look at it don't manage to put it in one box. Formatting is absurd and dangerous, this way we are pre-formatting our minds.

ES: I think of experimental film as a genre in itself, in which you use elements of documentary or fiction, or a mixture of both.

AP: When you say experimental film, people immediately think of a super 8 camera techniques – they think about a certain kind of film made in the 1970s when things were tried out technically.

ES: There seems to be a dissociation of the word experimental with what is new, with exploring, similar to how the word avant-garde is connected to artists at the beginning of the 20th century. The words get used more as a definition of a specific style.

AP: For me the experiment is more present on the level of the narration, but many people see experiment as something technical. The experimental techniques of the 1970s have now become almost "classic", and their aesthetics have been borrowed in the fashion industry, for example.

ES: *Is there a reason behind the choice of the main character? Do you sympathize with him, personally or politically?*

SQ: Not especially. There are many characters in the film, all with different views. When you work in fiction, you must be fair to all the characters and not express your views directly through them. You have to be able to express different opinions, also the ones that you don't share yourself. Basically film is a place where you can ask questions, a place of different hypotheses, incarnated by characters.

Of course we were interested in putting the emphasis on the main character as somebody who is traumatized. But somehow everybody in that story was united by the trauma of the factory's closure. I use the word "trauma" once again because that is exactly what is in reality - here is someone whose identity was erased when he lost his job. The trauma is so deep, that he is literally "not the same anymore", and will never be again. An external unexpected event occurred and the workers often said that they hadn't been prepared to the closure. This event stopped their own feeling of time, right on this Thursday 27th February 1997. They still refer to themselves as Ex-Renault workers and clearly cannot let go of the past.

Therefore we thought it was important to present that kind of loss, from different perspectives and from people who had made different choices. Despite the variety of ways in which their lives turned out, the range of views they have on the situation, in the end everyone gathers together in the memory of colleagues who died. At the same time the gathering commemorates the worker's own history, in which no one else is interested anymore. People are in general more concerned with the problems of today. That's why it's important to put this history into focus, with all the different hypotheses about how to survive such a trauma after 15 years.

ES: *What is clearly not in the film is the voice of the management, the voice from inside the factory, from the people that make the decisions. Was that a conscious choice? Did you have contact with someone from the management?*

SQ: We didn't want to go into that aspect of the story. We wanted to concentrate on obsolescence - being an obsolete person because other people decide upon it through their arrogance and greed. For the management it's just an economic

decision, there is no human perspective at all. We wanted to focus on the workers. Manual workers still exist today but they are fewer and fewer of them. We wanted a proper representation of them by means of fiction, and not by placing different opinions side by side, like a TV documentary would do. It's important that they are characters in a story, and that it's not about who is right or wrong. The film has become a universal story about a certain loss of identity and the question of solidarity.

ES: Do you feel there is a tendency towards voicing your own opinion throughout your process, especially when you talk about the factory management not caring about the human consequences of their decision?

AP: The situation was and is very highly emotive, so it required and requires strong opinions. In the factory there were of course little managers, local people, who had no choice but to follow the orders of the big boss. Since late 19th century, in situations like this it has not been possible to 'kill' the boss. The main person in this particular conflict was not publicly lynched. Now he has a very good job and has continued his career.

SQ: Making a film is not like giving a diplomatic discourse. It's about taking a point of view that is decided upon early in the process. We felt that these workers deserved to be the subject of a story. I think that the people who take decisions at any level already have enough representation in Hollywood. However, we aren't making heroes out of the workers, they are just people who suffer, struggle, give up sometimes, hesitate or act quickly.

AP: If you want our point of view, it lies in the uncomfortable thought that accompanies the film. The idea that this kind of obsolescence could happen to everyone.